

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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President Obama on Human Rights Situation in Cuba

Obama reaches out to Cuban people, seeks new era in U.S.-Cuba relations

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary
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Statement by the President on the Human Rights Situation in Cuba

Recent events in Cuba, including the tragic death of Orlando Zapata Tamayo, the repression visited upon Las Damas de Blanco, and the intensified harassment of those who dare to give voice to the desires of their fellow Cubans, are deeply disturbing.

These events underscore that instead of embracing an opportunity to enter a new era, Cuban authorities continue to respond to the aspirations of the Cuban people with a clenched fist.

Today, I join my voice with brave individuals across Cuba and a growing chorus around the world in calling for an end to the repression, for the immediate, unconditional release of all political prisoners in Cuba, and for respect for the basic rights of the Cuban people.

During the course of the past year, I have taken steps to reach out to the Cuban people and to signal my desire to seek a new era in relations between the governments of the United States and Cuba. I remain committed to supporting the simple desire of the Cuban people to freely determine their future and to enjoy the rights and freedoms that define the Americas, and that should be universal to all human beings.

President Obama Seeks \$2.8 Billion for Haiti

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — President Obama has asked Congress for \$2.8 billion in emergency funds for the recovery and reconstruction of Haiti after January's catastrophic earthquake that killed more than 230,000 people and affected nearly 3 million Haitians.

"This emergency funding for Haiti is a must," Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry said March 24. "It's a non-negotiable measurement of how the United States responds to a humanitarian emergency."

A portion of the funds will be used to repay the U.S. Defense Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) for funds they expended in providing emergency relief immediately after the

earthquake struck. The request includes \$1 billion in new funding for relief and reconstruction.

Money for rebuilding homes, schools, farm and industrial facilities, and the electrical system, and to improve governance and the judicial system is included in the request.

The initial crisis has passed, but international experts believe it will take more than a decade to rebuild the Caribbean island nation of approximately 9 million people, one of the poorest nations of the Western Hemisphere.

"Even if humanitarian needs remain significant and require the ongoing attention of the humanitarian actors, in particular in terms of shelter and sanitation, our focus must now shift toward the recovery and rebuilding of Haiti," said Walter Kälin, representative of the U.N. secretary-general on the human rights of internally displaced persons and co-director of the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement. "The internally displaced persons in Haiti must be provided with the means to rebuild their existence and to resume their life."

"The road toward durable solutions is long and arduous. The full commitment of the international community is needed to support and facilitate the tasks of the national and local authorities in Haiti, which have the primary responsibility to create conditions conducive to durable solutions," Kälin said.

A donors' conference to mobilize international support for Haiti will be held at the United Nations March 31. Haitian officials have said it will likely take \$11.5 billion in reconstruction assistance for the full recovery of Port-au-Prince and the surrounding areas stricken by the earthquake.

"The government of Haiti faces enormous challenges," the State Department said March 4 in announcing the conference to be held at U.N. headquarters in New York. "Meeting these challenges will require a sustained and substantial commitment from the international community, in support of the government and people of Haiti."

"At the donors' conference, Haiti will present its vision of Haiti's future and how international support can assist," the announcement said.

The ministerial-level conference is jointly sponsored by the United States and the United Nations in cooperation with the Haitian government, and also with the support of Brazil, Canada, the European Union, France and Spain. It is being called the International Donors' Conference Towards a New Future for Haiti.

"Donor countries, international organizations and other partners will have an opportunity to pledge resources, to coordinate support of Haiti's long-term recovery, and to commit to a sustained effort to support Haiti," the department announcement said.

The Dominican Republic, which shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti, hosted an international conference of high-level technical donors March 16-17 to evaluate the economic consequences of the earthquake. And on March 22, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) agreed to forgive \$479 million of the country's \$1.2 billion in foreign debt.

Former U.S. Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, at the request of President Obama, are spearheading international efforts to raise funds for Haitian relief. They met with Haitian President René Préal on the grounds of the damaged National Palace in Port-au-Prince March 22 to help focus attention on the need for long-term reconstruction funding for Haiti. The nonprofit Clinton Bush Haiti Fund has raised \$37 million for Haitian relief. Obama has personally donated \$200,000 to the Haiti Fund from his Nobel Peace Prize award.

The IADB said it would provide approximately \$2 billion in new financing to Haiti over the next decade.

The European Union said it would provide \$1.36 billion for Haitian reconstruction in the coming years. And the Group of Seven nations — Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States — announced in early February that they would cancel Haiti's bilateral debt.

The World Bank's board approved a \$65 million project to support the recovery of Haiti's critical infrastructure and the re-establishment of basic state functions. It is part of a \$100 million emergency grant announced by the World Bank right after the earthquake.

PRELIMINARY STUDY

A preliminary study by IADB economists indicates that it could cost as much as \$14 billion to rebuild Haiti's homes, schools, roads and other structures damaged by the earthquake.

"The study confirms that the Haitian earthquake is likely to be the most destructive natural disaster in modern times, when viewed in relation to the size of Haiti's population and its economy," the development bank said.

A more detailed accounting of the cost of reconstruction, which is being conducted by the development bank, the World Bank and the U.N. Development Fund, will be completed in several months, the IADB said in releasing

its preliminary report.

Strong Progress Made on U.S.-Russian Arms Treaty

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — American and Russian negotiators are "making strong progress" toward a historic nuclear arms reduction treaty that would move the world a little closer to President Obama's vision of a nuclear-free world, a senior White House official says.

"We are, I think, very close to having an agreement on a START treaty, but won't have one until President Obama and his counterpart, [Russian President Dmitry] Medvedev, have a chance to speak," White House press secretary Robert Gibbs said at a press briefing March 24. The two leaders are expected to confer by telephone March 26.

The United States and Russia have been negotiating a new treaty to replace the expired Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or START, signed in 1991 by President George H.W. Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. The new 10-year treaty aims to reduce both nuclear arsenals to a range of 1,500 to 1,675 nuclear warheads, and cap long-range missiles and strategic bombers to 700 each.

Obama spoke with Medvedev for about 30 minutes by telephone March 13 and "had a good conversation" about the progress made by negotiators from both countries who are meeting in Geneva, National Security Council spokesman Mike Hammer said. At issue are a series of highly technical matters that require careful discussion, he added.

"The results of their talks are encouraging, and both leaders are committed to concluding an agreement soon," Hammer said.

Gibbs said White House advisers have discussed returning to Prague, where Obama first announced his intention to pursue a world free from the threat of nuclear weapons, to sign a new treaty.

"We believe that a new START treaty begins to take many important steps between the two greatest holders of those nuclear weapons," Gibbs told reporters. "So I would anticipate that when we have something to sign, it will be in Prague."

The new treaty is not expected to restrict U.S. plans for a limited missile defense shield based in Europe.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry and Senator Richard Lugar, the ranking Republican

on the committee, met with Obama and his advisers for about an hour March 24 and received a full briefing on the proposed treaty and the support needed to win approval in the Senate, which requires a two-thirds majority. Any new treaty would also have to be approved by the Russian Duma before becoming law; the approval process could take months.

"A well-designed treaty will send an important message to the rest of the world that America is prepared to lead efforts with key stakeholders to reduce the threat of nuclear weapons," Kerry said after the meeting with Obama. "Once the treaty and its associated documents are completed and submitted to the Senate, Senator Lugar and I look forward to holding hearings and giving the treaty immediate and careful attention."

Lugar said the president is confident of signing a new treaty, which runs about 20 pages and contains a series of protocols or annexes.

State Department spokesman Mark Toner told reporters that negotiators in Geneva are extremely close to a final treaty. The original talks on the treaty were held in April 2009 in London when Obama met with Medvedev at the outset of the Group of 20 talks on the global economic crisis.

PRAGUE VISION

On April 5, 2009, Obama announced in a major speech at Hradcany Square in Prague that he envisioned a world free from the threat of nuclear weapons and would make reducing that threat a signature piece of his foreign policy agenda.

"Today, I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons," Obama told the Prague audience. "I'm not naive. This goal will not be reached quickly — perhaps not in my lifetime. It will take patience and persistence. But now we, too, must ignore the voices who tell us that the world cannot change."

In agreeing to reduce nuclear arsenals, the United States and Russia are aiming to ease tensions substantially and strengthen mutual trust — both critical ingredients for enhanced relations.

"We've taken important steps forward to increase nuclear security and to stop the spread of nuclear weapons. This starts with the reduction of our own nuclear arsenals," Obama said at a July 6 press conference in Moscow with Medvedev.

As owners of more than 95 percent of the world's nuclear weapons, Obama said, the world's two leading nuclear

powers must lead by example. The mutual agreement to reduce nuclear arsenals is part of a broader goal of reducing nuclear tensions across the globe, and of preventing rogue states and extremists from obtaining nuclear material.

During talks in London April 1, 2009, before the start of the G20 economic summit, Obama and Medvedev said they wanted to take concrete steps toward the long-term goal of disarmament, while sending a powerful message to countries such as North Korea and Iran, whose controversial nuclear-development programs are subject to U.N. Security Council sanctions and expanded scrutiny.

This new treaty would expand on the 2002 Moscow Treaty signed by then-President George W. Bush and then-President Vladimir Putin that limited warheads to 2,200 by the close of 2012.

Iraqis Vote in Eight American Cities

Stories from the voting booths

By Steve Holgate

Special Correspondent

Portland, Oregon — Iraqis felt the chill of late winter in Michigan rather than in Baghdad. They braved traffic jams in San Diego rather than Iraqi checkpoints. Many drove for more than 10 hours to cast their vote. At the end of the day, many of the 26,000 registered Iraqi voters were pleased to show the purple ink on their finger indicating that they had voted.

Their commitment to Iraq's democratic future was clear.

Polling stations established by the Iraqi Elections Out of Country Voting Program stretched out across the United States, in eight cities from Washington to San Francisco. Their location reflected the concentrations of Iraqi residents in America; two were in the Detroit area and several in the sunny Southwest.

For three days, March 5-7, Iraqis flocked to polling stations.

Weary poll workers put in 12-hour days, but in interviews with *America.gov*, they spoke with satisfaction about how the election process went smoothly.

Aws Ali, a young Iraqi American and recent university graduate, worked at the polling station in Arlington, Virginia, just outside Washington. "People were excited at the chance to vote," he told *America.gov*. "It was very exciting to see people from all religions and groups — Sunnis, Kurds, Shiites — all in one place, making their voices heard, and getting along at the same time."

Ali added, "A lot of television cameras were there and many people were interviewed. They really appreciated that American news outlets, not just Arab news outlets, were interested in what they had to say."

Among his other duties, Ali served as the liaison between the hotel and voters. The hotel staff "wanted to help out in any way they could," he said. Many staff members learned how to greet voters in Arabic and helped them understand what documents they would need to show before voting.

Almost 4,000 kilometers away, Shak Hanish served as coordinator of the polling effort near San Diego. His impressions were similar to Ali's: "People are trying to take part in forming the future of Iraq and its democratic process," said Hanish, who is a professor of political science at a university in San Diego. Nearly 4,200 votes were cast in the San Diego area, making it one of the busiest polling stations in the United States.

Speaking of the voters at his polling station, Hanish told a San Diego radio station, "Their bodies are here physically, but they are thinking of their homeland. ... They want their country to live in peace, have stability, democracy, freedom."

Farther up the California coast, Raymond George, an Iraqi American, coordinated the voting in Pleasanton, near San Francisco. "People were very excited and very happy," George said. About 1,400 voters came to this polling station, located in the county fairgrounds. Voters came from as far away as Portland, Oregon, nearly 1,000 kilometers away. A dozen Iraqis from Salt Lake City rented a bus and made the 10-hour drive to Pleasanton to make their voices heard.

George said there had been some campaigning by the major Iraqi parties, though it was very low-key, consisting mainly of get-out-the-vote efforts.

In San Diego, Hanish described two different newlywed couples coming to vote still dressed in their wedding clothes and accompanied by musicians. "That was a very happy moment," he said. "I nearly cried."

The *East Bay News* quoted one San Francisco-area Iraqi voter as saying, "[Voting] means that I am, in a very small way, contributing to the possibility that Iraqis will be able to shape our own future."

In Arlington, Nabil al Bassam arrived at the polling station with his wife, their 4-year-old son and a number of friends. "I was so excited," he told *America.gov*. He said it was like going to a party as he ran into Iraqi friends from the states of Massachusetts and South Carolina. He admitted that he had been uneasy when he had voted in

Iraq five years ago. "This time," he said, "I was proud and showing my [purple-stained] finger and encouraging others to vote."

He added: "We would like to forget the past and turn the page. We want Iraq to be like other countries. We have everything to make a successful country. So, why not?"

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